

Older Women's Health: Contemporary and Emerging Health Issues

Introductory Remarks

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Dr. Williams is the Director of the National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD. The introduction is based on his presentation at the National Conference on Women's Health, held in Bethesda, MD, June 17-18, 1986. Dr. Williams served as the Moderator for the plenary panel session on "Older Women's Health: Contemporary and Emerging Health Issues."

Synopsis

This important topic, aging, is really a woman's issue as things now stand. Someday, it is to be hoped, it will be more a man's issue as well, but that is one of the research challenges.

Few features of the human aging process have such enormous personal, economic, social, and cultural consequences as the sex differential in longevity. Life expectancy at birth for women has increased far more rapidly than for men.

By the time a person reaches the age of 85, there are approximately five women for every two men. Many other statistics support and illustrate dramatically the importance of gender differences in aging and the challenge of trying to understand why they exist: It is important also to understand the differences in disability.

In a recent issue of the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society William Hazzard looked at the biological basis for the sexual differential in longevity. His review is extremely thorough and thought-provoking. Dr. Hazzard recently left the geriatric unit at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine to become Chairman of Medicine at Bowman Gray School of Medicine in Winston-Salem, NC.

The discussions that follow will examine many aspects of this important subject.

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Health Among Older Women In the United States

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Synopsis

In the United States, women live longer than men, and they have lower death rates at virtually every age and for most causes of death. The sex differential in mortality has been increasing since the early 1900s, especially for those 15-24 and 55-64 years of age. Since 1970, however, that trend has slowed for persons

45-74, and for the first time, the sex differential among those 55-64 was actually smaller in 1980 than in 1970. While women have lower age-specific death rates than men for most causes of death, among adults 65 years old and older, the leading causes of death are the same for men and women: heart disease, cancer, and stroke.

Despite their continuing mortality advantage, women generally experience more illness than men. They report more self-perceived poor health up to age 60. It has been frequently suggested that women may be more willing to acknowledge and report illness than men. Sex differences in illness among the elderly persist, however, when physical examinations are used for assessment of population-based samples. Injuries, one of the few conditions more common among men, are more common among women after age 55. Among the elderly, women appear to have more conditions that are disabling, such as arthritis, while men have more life-threatening conditions, such as heart disease. Women also use more health services than men, and they are institutionalized more frequently in their later years.